

Discernment for Journeying Through Babylon to Athens and Zion

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My wife and I once boarded a train going south from Paris to Marseilles, a Mediterranean port. At Lyon, about halfway there, part of the train (the part we were in!) split off and headed east toward Geneva. As soon as we saw the Alps, we realized that we were off course. We got off in Grenoble, caught a train back to Lyon, then took a later train to Marseilles. Our minimal ability to discern between the Alps and the Mediterranean helped us to make a necessary course correction on a physical journey.

We need discernment for each of the three tracks of our journey through life. These tracks can be symbolized by places: Babylon for material life, Athens for intellectual life, and Zion for spiritual life. Scriptural imagery distinguishes Babylon from Sodom, an emblem of gross perversions. Babylon represents our entire material experience—meeting our physical needs, “getting and spending,”¹ relishing “the vain things of the world,”² and satisfying “the natural man.”³ According to a “double commandment,” we are instructed both to be “not of the world” and to be “in the world.”⁴ Peter, advising the Saints to “be ye holy,” did so “at Babylon”⁵—that is, in the world. This is a main purpose of our “second estate”: to be proven while we dwell on the earth.⁶ Claims of bravery mean nothing in the absence of danger.

Likewise, innocence shielded by nonopportunity is not the same thing as virtue that is freely chosen among alternatives and then severely tested in the furnace of life. So we are charged to pass our mortal probation not isolated in monastic enclaves but thoroughly engaged in human society.

Babylon thus comprises our material circumstances, our physical movements, our social environments, and even our professional careers. In traveling through Babylon it is important to increase our powers of discernment by using them—just as we strengthen our muscles through physical exercise. Discerning our journey through the world entails, first, choosing specific worthy destinations rather than just drifting somewhere. Floating with natural currents usually takes us downstream to Babylon’s Sodom-like districts. To avoid these in favor of better neighborhoods, we seek positive objectives and make frequent course corrections in order to reach them.

At times as we exercise discernment, we may even need to change our destinations. In fall 2000 we were shepherding BYU students

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in the Holy Land. They were visiting Akko for a couple of hours en route to Jerusalem. But Jerusalem suddenly experienced a spike of unrest, so we changed their destination to the safer area of Galilee.

Likewise, discerning the road ahead may require us to modify our professional goals. I grew up as the son of a metalworker in an LDS ward with about 20 dentists. They taught me to visualize sin as a cavity! At any rate, in my midteens I decided to be a dentist. That was my vocational ambition until I encountered a dose of reality called organic chemistry! I then prudently changed my career path.

Among the most noteworthy physical journeys were those of Lehi and Brigham Young. Their examples show us that although travelers meet obstacles and get sidetracked, resolute ones persevere until they reach their destinations.

I've had some experience with obstacles and sidetracks. After teaching at the University of Miami for a year, I received in fall 1973 a postdoctoral grant to do research in Yemen. My ticket, paid for by the grant, took me from Miami to New York to Paris to Tunis and then (the plan was) to Cairo and Yemen. Because we had to pay for their travel ourselves, my wife and three small children took a cheapie airline to Luxembourg, rode trains for three days to Istanbul, then got on a plane to Beirut, whence they were to fly to meet me at the Cairo airport so we could proceed to Yemen together.

No one told us that a war would break out between Egypt and Israel a few hours before our scheduled reunion. My wife missed her plane from Beirut—luckily, because it came under fire. My plane was grounded in Libya, where I was put under arrest for three days and then sent back to Tunis. It took me nearly a week to discover that my family was stranded in Lebanon. They came to Tunis, where my research grant had been reassigned by U.S. officials—who changed their minds, however, and told us to proceed to Yemen. We went first

to Rome. Our flight from Rome to Jidda in western Arabia was diverted around the war zone to eastern Arabia, where we were detained overnight and then deported to Bahrain. After a month of such obstacles and sidetracks, we finally arrived in Yemen, where we discovered a magical society in which I conducted my research and my wife taught at a Yemeni school. After leaving Yemen we finally did go to Cairo, where we spent the next 11 years.

Whereas Babylon stands for worldly matters, Athens represents intellectual ones. To Latter-day Saints, however, Athens symbolizes a destination as well as a passage, for we know that intelligence is a basic part of our eternal nature and that “whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.”⁷ So we should work to maximize our intellectual capacity and discernment not just for the purpose of navigating routes but also for that of magnifying our stewardships over our very selves. Moreover, the “greatest commandment” is to love the Lord with all our mind as well as with all our strength and soul.⁸ So we want to love Him—not with an empty, small, or flabby mind but with a mind as large, as vigorous, and as disciplined as we can possibly make it.

How do we strengthen our intellects and our powers of intellectual discernment? First, we make intelligent choices to avoid mental Sodoms—like pornography and drivelspewing media that stupefy our minds instead of stimulating them. But we don't avoid the big ideas and the hard questions, which we are, in effect, mandated to engage. BYU's mission statement reminds us that “a broad university education . . . will help students think clearly [and] understand important ideas,”⁹ and the civilization course guidelines urge “the exploration of some important questions and themes.”

I remember a student telling me on the first day of a world civilization course: “I'm going to be an accountant. I don't need to know

anything about Shakespeare or Gandhi." Three months later he changed his mind. A young woman he home taught consented to date him because, after our class discussion on early 20th-century art, he'd been able to explain the symbolism of her Marc Chagall print.

But general education courses can do more than improve our social lives. They can stretch and sharpen our intellects to make us better citizens of our country and more effective servants of God. In that regard, some of the thorns and thistles¹⁰ prescribed for Adam's posterity may include thorny ideas; when we sweat over them, we broaden and sharpen our minds. After all, athletes improve their performance by facing better competition; businesses become more efficient and make finer products by participating in competitive markets; and our intelligence grows in quantity and quality by wrestling with challenging ideas. That principle, I believe, is implicit both in the Lord's teaching to Abraham about mortality's purpose¹¹ and in Lehi's profound statement about "opposition in all things."¹²

Besides, intellectual discovery is an exhilarating experience, not just a mandate. I remember the exhilaration the first time I read in *The Prelude* by Wordsworth a few verses that paraphrase Lehi's statement about the importance of opposition:

*There is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society. How strange, that all
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
Within my mind, should e'er have borne a part,
And that a needful part, in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself!*¹³

Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter experienced such a discovery. He was struggling to define the concept that—in order

to protect the innocent fully—courts of law should treat even the villainous fairly. He went to see Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, about Sir Thomas More's interactions with the selfish tyrant King Henry VIII. At the point where More's character spoke the line "Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake,"¹⁴ Justice Frankfurter blurted out, "That's the point, . . . that's it!"¹⁵

When I first saw that play, I thought "That's it!" in two other scenes. In one, Sir Thomas learns of an oath crafted to entrap him by the king's henchmen; yet he hopes that the wording of the oath will let him take it without violating his conscience. He tells his daughter: "God . . . made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind!"¹⁶ The other scene is set in the Tower of London, where More has been jailed for refusing to take the oath. His daughter urges him to say it with his mouth and to think otherwise in his heart; after all, she notes, he is a virtuous hero, and it's not his fault the government is bad. Sir Thomas replies:

*If we lived in a State where virtue was profitable,
common sense would make us good, and greed
would make us saintly. . . . But since in fact we
see that [villainies] commonly profit far beyond
[virtues], and have to choose, . . . why then perhaps
we must stand fast a little.*¹⁷

So we seek Athens keenly and do not fear it—unlike the slothful servant who, being "afraid,"¹⁸ buried his talent *and* his future. Most Latter-day Saints who lose their way do so in Babylon's hedonistic arcades, where, like Housman's ale-drinking "fellows whom it hurts to think," they "look into the pewter pot / To see the world as the world's not."¹⁹ Comparatively fewer get lost in Athens' laboratories, lecture halls, and libraries. It is usually Babylon's "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God"²⁰ who try to rationalize

destructive self-gratification in half-baked intellectual terms, rehearsing clichés about freedom to justify enslaving vices. Indeed, as a rule, better education correlates with stronger commitment to gospel principles and with greater activity in the Church,²¹ to which ignorance is the graver threat.

As by design does mortal life itself, the life of the mind does, of course, have pitfalls. President Hugh B. Brown told BYU students 36 years ago, “One cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong.” Just as we endure setbacks when we take bad turns along roads through the world, we suffer negative consequences for our immature or misinformed intellectual conclusions. But, as President Brown went on to say, “Generally more thinking is the antidote for the evils that spring from wrong thinking.”²²

“More thinking” should not entail just parroting our brightest, most articulate fellow humans, past or present. Concerning the greatest truths, they’ve all speculated wrong on some vital points, leading astray any uncritical disciples whose quest takes them no farther than saying “me too.” Wordsworth, for example, venerated “meadow, grove, and stream”²³ to the extent of pantheism. While appreciating his insight about reconciling discordant elements, we would not follow him in substituting the worship of abstract nature for the worship of our personal Father.

Hugh Nibley was an advisor for my master of arts thesis. Once, when I was in his office to get feedback on a draft chapter, his phone rang. He picked it up, listened for a while, then, before hanging up, said, “You ought to do your own research.” Refusing to “set [himself] up for a light unto the world,”²⁴ he fended off would-be “Nibley groupies.” Rather, he urged his students not just to do their own research but also and especially to do their own critical thinking. To that end God made every intelligence “independent . . . to act for itself.”²⁵

We can strengthen our intellectual discernment only by using it often. When I was in France on a mission 45 years ago, I learned a French proverb: “*C’est en forgeant qu’on devient forgeron*” (“It is by smithing that one becomes a smith”). So it is by thinking discerningly that one becomes a discerning thinker.

Of course mature intellectual independence requires a long apprenticeship. From the word *sophomore*—one who has completed a freshman year—comes the word *sophomoric*: “overconfident of knowledge but poorly informed and immature.”²⁶ We are sophomoric when we consider ourselves wise on the basis of a little learning²⁷—what Santayana called “a torch of smoky pine / That lights the pathway but one step ahead” or what Paul likened to seeing “through a glass, darkly.”²⁸ Indeed, “the learned” are apt to become “puffed up in the pride of their hearts.”²⁹ Such vanity is especially dangerous, according to C. S. Lewis and President Benson,³⁰ when it involves enmity for God. Conversely, “a wise man will hear, and will increase learning.”³¹ The wisest scholars learn early to forsake arrogant dogmatism and to embrace humility. Although working ultimately toward intellectual self-reliance, we need to stay mindful that our thought processes are still comparatively juvenile. We limit our intellectual potential when, with more zeal than knowledge,³² as adolescents we embrace a worldly intellectual or political trend, demonize its alternatives, and devote ourselves, as Santayana put it, to “not covet truth, but victory and the dispelling of their own doubts.”³³ With humility and open minds we should read the great thinkers—to exercise our brains and to discover and refine nuggets of truth. As Paul advised, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”³⁴

The ideal of Zion represents the destination of our spiritual journey. For every difficulty of physical, professional, or intellectual traveling—drifting, obstacles, sidetracks,

pitfalls, wrong conclusions, and sophomoric pride—there are spiritual equivalents with spiritual consequences. But the stakes are higher. I remember a time when our family was ordering pizza; my children debated whether to get pepperoni or another topping. The debate ended when one of them said, “Well, it’s not a life-or-death decision.”

According to Alma, the choices we make on our life’s spiritual track, however, really are life-or-death decisions, with “joy” accompanying (spiritual) life and “remorse of conscience” accompanying (spiritual) death.³⁵ For precisely that reason, less than two months ago Elder Bednar taught us about spiritual discernment.³⁶ If you have “cut-and-paste” functions in your mind, insert what he said here. I add a few observations from my own experience.

Spiritual discernment helps us to perceive our own lapses and lacks. I have met persons whose pride or enmity for God blinded them to their sins and so to their very eternal predicament. To such was Samuel talking when he called “unto the Lord, . . . that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great.”³⁷ As Paul put it, “There is none righteous. . . . For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”; so every human needs “the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”³⁸

But I have met others whose keen awareness of their past and present failings—and of their inability to overcome these on their own—have in effect blinded them to the grace of the Atonement and to the miracles of repentance and forgiveness. Reasoning that “I am unworthy, so the Savior can’t redeem me” constitutes a spiritual *non sequitur*.³⁹

Beyond enabling us to recognize our foibles, spiritual discernment helps us to see and feel God’s goodness, love, and redemptive power. Like the abilities to discern the world’s best destinations and to intellectually discern nuggets of truth from speculation or sophistry, spiritual discernment becomes stronger and sharper through use. A doctor once showed

me an X-ray and said, “You can plainly see the problem right here.” But, having no experience reading X-rays, I could see nothing but fuzzy blurs. The doctor could read X-rays because he did so every day. By seeking the Light of Christ every day, we increase our capacity to discern good from evil by its illumination. By listening to the Holy Ghost every day, we learn to hear more clearly the “still small voice.”⁴⁰

Babylon’s happiness is attained, as Shakespeare put it, through attracting “Fortune and men’s eyes.”⁴¹ Babylon’s hedonism is so pervasive and potent that many defer until the afterlife the possibility of Zion’s happiness—entailing personal and group righteousness and holiness. But the Lord clearly seeks to “establish Zion” among us here and now.⁴² That begs the key question: How can we establish Zion while dwelling in Babylon? We can do it, in effect, by sanctifying the nooks and crannies of Babylon that are nearest to us—our own bodies and minds, our families and homes, our wards and neighborhoods.

We start with our personal core and proceed outward to whatever periphery our influence can reach. If we are blessed with wealth, we consecrate it to the Lord—who told Martin Harris not to covet his own property.⁴³ If we are blessed with learning, we devote it to strengthening God’s enterprises and His children—our brothers and sisters.⁴⁴ In that regard, so many scriptures pair worshipping God with serving our fellow beings that we must regard them as symbiotic, mutually necessary endeavors. We can’t serve God effectively without serving each other effectively.

Some of my best experiences with the growth of spiritual discernment have come while serving at the BYU Jerusalem Center. Some students would arrive—fresh from Babylon—boasting of their thrilling amusements to get attention. But then they went to the hill east of Bethel to reflect on

the covenant of Abraham, to Mount Sinai to contemplate that of Moses, and to Mount Ebal to think about Joshua's rededication. They visited Nazareth to see where Jesus "grew, and waxed strong in spirit."⁴⁵ They traveled into the Judean wilderness to consider the resolve with which He began His ministry, to Galilee to ponder His Sermon on the Mount and the principles of His higher law, to Mount Tabor to recall His Transfiguration, then back to Jerusalem to study His healing miracles. In a culminating journey they walked from Bethany over the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane, then across the Kidron Valley to the possible sites of Golgotha and the nearby tomb in a garden. That evening they reenacted the Last Supper.

By then I could feel that most students were forsaking Babylon and approaching Zion. As they recommitted themselves to serving God better, they simultaneously shifted their concerns from their own comforts and conceits to the welfare of their classmates and others within the reach of their positive influence. Such commitments each of us has made and remade many times—in premortal life, at baptism, in the temple, and every Sabbath when we partake of the sacramental emblems. I pray that we shall perform our next act of covenant renewal with greater resolve, confidence, and purpose.

I pray that we shall resolve to discern our way to worthy destinations in mortal life; that we shall resolve to strengthen our minds to appreciate with exhilaration our intellectual heritage, to understand our complex world more fully, and to love the Lord and serve His children more effectively; and that we shall resolve to consecrate and sanctify ourselves, our assets, and our environments. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. William Wordsworth, "The World Is Too Much with Us" (1807), line 2.
2. Alma 5:53.

3. Mosiah 3:19.
4. John 17:9–18.
5. 1 Peter 1:15, 5:13.
6. Abraham 3:25–26.
7. D&C 130:18.
8. See Mark 12:30; see also John W. Welch, "And with All Thy Mind," *BYU 2003–2004 Speeches* (Provo: BYU, 2004), 105–12.
9. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 1996), 1.
10. See Genesis 3:18–19.
11. See Abraham 3:24–26.
12. 2 Nephi 2:11.
13. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (written 1799–1805), book I, lines 341–50.
14. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 38.
15. *From the Diaries of Felix Frankfurter*, ed. Joseph P. Lash (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 50.
16. Bolt, *A Man*, 73.
17. Bolt, *A Man*, 81.
18. Matthew 25:25.
19. A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), no. 62, stanza 2.
20. 2 Timothy 3:4.
21. See Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, "Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 43–58.
22. Hugh B. Brown, *An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (13 May 1969), 9.
23. William Wordsworth, *Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1807), stanza 1.
24. 2 Nephi 26:29.
25. D&C 93:30.
26. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1985, s.v. "sophomoric," 1125.
27. See 2 Nephi 9:28.
28. George Santayana, "O World, Thou Choolest Not" (1894); 1 Corinthians 13:12.
29. 2 Nephi 28:15.

30. See book 3, chapter 8, of C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 121–28; see also Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 4–7.

31. Proverbs 1:5.

32. See Hugh W. Nibley, “Zeal Without Knowledge,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 2 (summer 1978): 101–12. The title of Nibley’s article derived from Romans 10:2: “For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.”

33. George Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine: Studies in Contemporary Opinion* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 198.

34. 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

35. Alma 29:5; see also Alma 11:42, 12:16.

36. See David A. Bednar, “Quick to Observe,” BYU devotional speech, 10 May 2005.

37. 1 Samuel 12:17.

38. Romans 3:10, 23–24.

39. A *non sequitur* (a conclusion that does not follow from its premises) is one of the classic “logical fallacies” or common errors of reasoning. Others include *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (assuming that A causes B just because it precedes it in time); circular argument (using premises that a conclusion presupposes in order to establish it); and *ad hominem* argument (criticizing the messenger instead of the message). See S. Morris Engel, *With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), and Robert J. Gula, *Nonsense: A Handbook of Logical Fallacies* (Mount Jackson, Virginia: Axios Press, 2002).

40. 1 Kings 19:12.

41. William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 29,” line 1.

42. See 3 Nephi 21:1 and D&C 105; see also Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1989).

43. See D&C 19:26.

44. See 2 Nephi 9:29.

45. Luke 2:40.

